

MSO ends season with performance that's out of this world

By K.S. Morrison

Saturday night at the Grand Opera House, the Macon Symphony Orchestra showcased local talent. But don't let the word 'local' fool you into thinking the performance was amateur. This was a concert of the highest caliber.

This last concert of the season opened with the overture to Mozart's opera, "Cosi Fan Tutte." The woodwind section in particular was most impressive with their intonation and their sensitivity to Mozart's song-like lines.

The brief first half finished with Chabrier's "España," a work the composer wrote about in a letter. He said he was writing an "extraordinary fantasia" that would incite the audience to such a pitch of excitement with its voluptuous melodies that the letter's recipient would literally hug the conductor. I didn't see anyone rushing up to Maestro Gnam during the performance to execute this exuberance, but this was surely Chabrier's miscalculation and not Gnam's because under his direction the piece was as charming as could be. The audience did, however, utter a collective expression of delight as soon as the piece concluded.

The second half was the weighty and substantial suite for orchestra "The Planets" by Gustav Holst. Seven movements represent seven planets, omitting only Earth and poor, demoted Pluto. Mars, the first movement, is familiar to most audience members but most of the other movements are less well known while still being every bit as stunning to hear. There are several solos for individual orchestra members. Concert Master Jason Economides, principal cellist Barbara Altman, and principal oboist Tom Underwood took turns enchanting the audience amid the generally superior performance of the orchestra as a whole.

The maestro captured the contrasting moods of the various movements especially well. The martial "Mars," the poignant "Venus" and the playful "Mercury" led into "Jupiter," in which the middle section has an irresistible Celtic-style theme.

Of the final three movements, the most unusual is the final, "Neptune." This suite does not end with a bang as is so often the case in other works, but employs a dramatic technique rarely heard in orchestral works before this one, that of fading away to nothing. Following Beethoven's example, Holst added chorus to this last movement, but rather than using the chorus to articulate a text, he treated two women's choruses as if they were instruments instead of voices; all the vocal parts are on a neutral syllable. For this performance, the women of the Macon State College Choir under the direction of Rebecca Lanning and the Choral Society of Middle Georgia under the direction of John Simons provided the two choruses needed.

Holst originally asked for the singers to be in an adjoining room offstage so they are heard quietly and at a distance. During the last bar, the door to the adjoining room is to be slowly and silently closed, thus providing the fade-out effect. Lacking the facilities offstage to do this, the choruses flanked the orchestra on both sides of the stage and were required to sing the high, sustained notes very quietly.

I was frankly skeptical about the seriously strenuous effort this would take, but both choruses handled it easily.

Even the fade at the end was effective, though it must have taken tremendous effort on the part of the singers.

And to make it even more atmospheric, albeit even more difficult for the singers, the lights in the entire hall dimmed to black during the last few bars. This was so other-worldly that the audience sat without breathing for several seconds after the piece was over before bursting into an ardent standing ovation.

Thus, the 32nd season of the Macon Symphony Orchestra ended, not with a bang, but with a dramatic, breathtaking flourish.